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ABSTRACT

Research results and suggestions concerning motivating college students are considered. Some research has indicated that motivation to learn in school is not fixed, but it is not changed drastically in short time periods either. It has been suggested that students who are not motivated to learn resist new information, and use categorical reasoning (good or bad) rather than an evaluative continuum. Research has also indicated that after controlling for the students' initial desire to take the course, student motivation is correlated to some extent with the instructor's enthusiasm and expressiveness. A variety of traditional teaching approaches was also found to be motivating (clear explanations, clear learning objectives, flexible teaching approaches, summarizing course material). Suggestions for improving student motivation are grouped under the following headings: begin where the students are; establish the relevance of the course material; involve the student in the choice of what will be studied, where possible; arrange learning tasks at levels appropriate to the abilities of your students; reward the students; consider the advantages of the discovery method; and use teacher-student interactions. Among the conclusions are the following: (1) motivation is a significant variable in a student's readiness and willingness to learn; (2) students are curious and do have a sincere desire to know and understand; (3) these assets can be capitalized upon if the learning situation provides for successful accomplishments at a fairly consistent rate; and (4) teachers can create an atmosphere where learning will be more efficient by stimulating student commitment and motivation. (SW)

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Motivating Students

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Few college teachers would deny the premise that motivated students are easier to teach, or that the students who are interested in learning do, in fact, learn more. Anyone who has taught a required course can attest to the fact. Studies of the IDEA system (e.g., Cashin and Perrin, 1978) have consistently found that the students' motivation (measured by their response to the statement "I had a strong desire to take this course") has a potent influence on their ratings of how much they have learned. A recent study at Kansas State University using a wide range of courses (Clegg, 1979) found that even though students answer this item at the end of the course, those responses correlate highly (r=.93) with their answer to the same question asked the first day of class. This means students remember their initial level of motivation. This does not mean that teachers need suffer through a course with whatever level of motivation, or unmotivation, that greets them the first day of class.

Motivation comes from a combination of forces--forces which operate both from within and without the individual's mind. The real challenge to the teacher is to encourage and take advantage of student motivation in ways that will harmonize with the acquisition of skills, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs considered important by the teacher.

Research at the Center for the Study of Motivation and Human Abilities (Frymier, 1970) indicates that: (1) Motivation to learn in school is not fixed, but it is not changed drastically in short periods of time either. It may be that a semester is entirely too short a time to change an individual's motivational pattern very much. (2) Motivation should be thought of in optimal - not maximal terms. Either too much or too little motivation may impede learning. (3) Positively motivated students (those who want to learn) have stronger and more positive self images. (4) Values and perceptions of time vary with the strength of motivation. The more positively motivated students are aware of the past, present and future in making decisions and deciding on future actions, while those students who are not motivated to learn in school tend to either hold on to or try to avoid certain aspects of their experience. The net result is that

*The majority of the ideas in this paper have been adapted from materials used by Dick Owens in his course, Principles of College Teaching, and his article in KSU Teaching Notes (Owens, 1972).

those who are not motivated to learn resist new information, tend to make snap decisions, use categorical reasoning (good or bad) rather than an evaluative continuum, and freeze their judgement even when new information suggests the wisdom of revising it. These findings have implications to those of us who teach. Since motivation and commitment are personal matters with each student, we as teachers should do what we can to eliminate the barriers that block them.

Clegg (1979) in her search of the literature found few empirical studies concerning what motivated college students to learn. She asked students to rate the item, "The teaching approach and/or attitude of this instructor motivated me in this course." She found that item correlated .60 or higher with seventeen other items, after controlling for the students' initial desire to take the course. Five of these items concerned the instructor's enthusiasm and expressiveness. The remaining twelve (with their correlations) were:

Explained course material clearly, and explanations were to the point. (.85)

Made it clear that he/she wanted to help students learn (.84)

Changed approaches to meet new situations. (.83)

Summarized material in a manner which aided retention. (.82)

Demonstrated the importance and significance of the subject matter. (.76)

Made it clear how each topic fit into the course. (.74)

Clearly stated the objectives of the course. (.74)

Used humor in a way I appreciated. (.72)

Found ways to help students answer their own questions. (.69)

Introduced stimulating ideas about the subject. (.68)

Was available to help students individually. (.67)

Explained the reasons for criticisms of students' academic performance. (.66)

These findings strongly suggest that it is not simply showmanship which motivates students (although if you do not have the students' attention, they are much more difficult to teach), but that using a variety of traditional teaching approaches can also be motivating.

What are some other things which college teachers can do to motivate students? (For a general discussion of a variety of topics in the context of motivating students, see Ericksen's 1974 book, Motivation for Learning.) Someone has commented that the trouble with what has been written about motivating students is that it's so unmotivating. Our suggestions are probably no exception, but they may have the advantage of bringing the "obvious" and "common sense" together in one place. These suggestions are based more upon the personal experience (or experiences) of teachers than upon empirical data. Even where there is research, the results are rarely such as to compel belief. They are offered as food for thought, not as canons of good teaching which must be followed.

BEGIN WHERE THE STUDENTS ARE

--Capitalize on the students existing interests. Find out what their majors are, why they are taking the course, etc.

--Find out what their weaknesses or

difficulties are. For example, if the course has a prerequisite, give a diagnostic test early in the term so the students will know what they still remember and what they must study over again.

ESTABLISH THE RELEVANCE OF THE COURSE MATERIAL

--Relate the course to the students' interests when possible.

--If students do not see the course as relevant (often the case with required courses) spend the time to explain in detail why the course is required. Use examples of how the course may be useful in their majors and careers.

--Discuss the ways in which <u>you</u> find the course interesting.

--Use questions, problems, case studies, etc., to demonstrate relevance.

INVOLVE THE STUDENT IN THE CHOICE OF WHAT WILL BE STUDIED, WHERE POSSIBLE

--Find out which topics are of most interest or value to the students in their perception (recognizing that they may not be the best judges).

--Include some optional or alternative units.

--Allow alternative learning methods, e.g., lecture, discussion, independent study, etc.

ARRANGE LEARNING TASKS AT LEVELS APPROPRIATE TO THE ABILITIES OF OF YOUR STUDENTS

--Do not make tasks too easy nor too hard. At first it may be better to err on the side of too easy; success breeds success. Include a range of difficulty in your assignments, and even in your quizzes and exams, so that every student has a chance to experience success as well as challenge.

--Tests and grades during the course motivate more when they discover what the students have learned, not just what they don't know.

--Too intense motivation creates anxiety and interferes with learning. While you have to set realistic standards, do it in a supportive rather than threatening way. For example, if you find out that a student is far behind, don't say to the student "You're way behind", but rather, "These are the things you need to learn. How may I help?"

REWARD THE STUDENTS

--Give the students feedback as soon as possible, e.g., return tests and papers quickly.

--Both positive and negative comments can stimulate learning, but positive comments seem to be more effective. At least, do not give only negative feedback. Praise what the student has done right, it tends to build self confidence. This sense of inner satisfaction is often the greatest motivation.

--When giving negative feedback, make it clear that it is a comment on the particular performance, not upon the student as a person.

--Recognize sincere efforts even if the product is not the greatest. This does not suggest that students should receive grades for effort rather than learning, but praise should be given for effort as well as accomplishment.

--Since success motivates, encourage self-competition. Help students to focus upon their continued improvement, not just on the final criteria for the course.

--Help students to set realistic goals. Failure to attain unrealistic goals can become a source of continuing disappointment and frustration.

CONSIDER THE ADVANTAGES OF THE "DISCOVERY" METHOD

--Use the students' curiosity. Pose questions. Encourage them to suggest approaches to a problem, to guess the results of an experiment, to propose a theory to explain empirical findings.

--Stress understanding more than facts. The students will remember better.

--Encourage students' initiative by leaving gaps for them to fill in, but draw their attention to the gaps and explain why you are leaving them.

--Don't use excessive direction or you may simply get blind conformance, or defiance. Provide some direction and structure, however, or you may simply frustrate the students.

--Help the students to evaluate their own progress. Encourage them to critique their own work, to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, we want the students to learn how to learn as well as master content and skills for the final exam.

USE TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS

--If there is to be "learning", the students will need to be involved. Keep the channels of communication open. Try to understand what students are saying, and check with them to be sure you are correct.

--The students' feelings about the teacher can be a significant help or hinderance to learning. Although college students need to learn how to learn from professors they dislike (just as adults have to work with people they dislike), fostering the students' dislike is not the strategy of choice. Learning provides enough difficulties without teachers going out of their way to create more.

--Active participation on the part of the students enhances their interest and learning.

--Take a variety of roles from active direction to reflective support.

--Provide a good model for the students to imitate - be human!

The conclusions which emerge are: (1) Motivation is a significant variable in a student's readiness and willingness to learn; (2) Students are curious and do have a sincere desire to know and understand; (3) These assets can be capitalized upon if the learning situation provides for successful accomplishments at a fairly consistent rate; and (4) Good teachers can do much to create an atmosphere where learning will be more efficient by stimulating student commitment and motivation.

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